The word Aryan is a term that was popularized and most commonly thought of in modern society as being related to Nazi Germany and their views of white supremacy. Today we can find organizations that use the term ‘Aryan’ to define themselves and their ideologies. Such groups include but are not limited to Aryan Nations, Aryan Brotherhood, Aryan Guard, White Aryan Resistance, and Aryan League. These organizations have several traits in common with each other. They are focused around a common ideal of white supremacy, racial prejudices and hatred. They are also often found being called ‘Neo-Nazis’. Nazi Germany conducted massive genocides based on racist and ethnocentric ideologies which focused around the blond-haired blue-eyed ideal of the German Aryan. This term is today so strongly focused around this 20th century Nazi usage and carries a strong negative stigma, which has prevented its use in academic and many common social circles. The idea of the Aryan race in western culture was used as scientific terms and hypotheses in the 18th and 19th centuries, long before the rise of the Third Reich. Nazi Germany took many of the ideas that were prevalent at that time to support their racist views. These ideas were historical hypotheses about the evolution and origins of western language from India and Iran and their spread in and out of Europe. This raises the question: how did the word ‘Aryan’ change from an honorific adjective used thousands of years ago in Indo-Iranian languages to a word associated today with a Germanic blond-haired blue-eyed master race?

Where did the word ‘Aryan’ come from?
The original roots of the word Aryan can be found in the Sanskrit and Avestan (the ancient Iranian language of the Zoroastrian scriptures) languages found in India and Iran. The Sanskrit ārya and the Avestan/Zend form (Airya), are the roots to the word Aryan which mean “belonging to the faithful, of one’s own tribe; honourable, noble” (Sanskrit Dictionary). It is a name that the ancient Indians and Iranians applied to themselves in contrast to the outside world, which they considered “base-born and contemptible” (Dwight 30). It is also a word that they used to describe their language and is considered to be the oldest autonym for the Indo-European language family. The usage of the word ‘ārya’ (noble) to define themselves and their language is similar to the word Слава (Slava) in Slavonic languages. Slava means ‘glory’, and that root is used to define the Slavic people as the glorified people. (Dwight 30). Usages of ārya can be found in Āryāvarta, or ‘home of the
Aryans’ which is what ancient Sanskrit literature refers to as the Indian homeland (Sanskrit Dictionary).

Why did the word move into the west?
The study of Sanskrit in the 18th century was driven by contemporary philologists. Philology is a study that tries to discover and explain “the origin, history and structure of the words composing the classical languages and those connected with them, whether cognate or derived” (Dwight 193). Philology conducted earlier attempted to trace back languages such as Greek and Latin into Hebrew, which they viewed as the original language, according to Christian beliefs. This was unquestioned by the church and the scientists of the time. The paradigm of language having its root in Hebrew was contested by Gottfried Leibniz, a German philosopher, sometime around the turn of the 18th century. Leibniz wrote in a letter to Tenzel, “To call Hebrew the primitive language is like calling the branches of a tree primitive branches, or like imagining that in some country hewn trunks could grow instead of trees.” He also asked, "If the primeval language existed even up to the time of Moses, whence came the Egyptian language?" (Muller 1861:126). This was the beginning of doubt on the roots of language originating with Hebrew.

William Jones was a philologist who strived, like many if not most other philologists of his time, to trace the roots of language back to the Judeo-Christian myth of the destruction of the tower of Babel. He took an interest in Indian culture and founded the Asiatic Society in Calcutta, an organization that sought to study Indian and oriental cultures and languages. Until this point, knowledge about India had been relatively untouched by western society. He produced a lot of works about India and Sanskrit, and eventually hypothesized a common root to Sanskrit and other languages, such as Latin, Greek and Persian (Lamb & Mitchell 31). He summed up his beliefs in a famous statement he presented in his Third Anniversary Discourse to the Asiatic Society in 1786.

“The Sanskrit language, whatever be its antiquity, is of a wonderful structure; more perfect than the Greek, more copious than the Latin, and more exquisitely refined than either, yet bearing to both of them a stronger affinity, both in the roots of verbs and in the forms of grammar, than could possibly have been produced by accident; so strong indeed, that no philologer could examine them all three, without believing them to have sprung from some common source, which, perhaps, no longer exists: there is a similar reason, though not quite so forcible, for supposing that both the Gothic and the Celtic, though blended with a very different idiom, had the same origin with the Sanskrit; and the old Persian might be added to the same family, if this were the place for discussing any question concerning the antiquities of Persia”.

This began a new wave of research and a change of paradigm about the roots and development of Indo-European languages. The first concept of a Proto-Indo-European language started with Jones. Philologists, based off of Jones’ ideas began to start searching for this hypothetical pre-language, and instead of turning to Hebrew, they began to focus their energies on Sanskrit.
How was ‘Aryan’ first interpreted in western culture?

The first usage of Aryan, or rather Arian, in western culture was by a man named Friedrich Schlegel, a German poet and philologist. He had taken an interest in studying the Indo-European languages. He was the founder of the studies of comparative Indo-European philology (Bonfiglio 145). Comparative philology utilized the technique of comparing two different languages and inducting similarities from them in attempt to find common linguistic trends in order to search for a common root. He began to look at a comparison of people and their language in a nationalistic way, viewing a certain race of having a certain language. In his book Über die Sprache und Weisheit der Indier (On the Language and Wisdom of India) (1808), he hypothesized that the Aryans of northern India came to Europe from India and the Aryan language they brought influenced the languages of the modern day Europeans. He discovered similarities to the Ari-root and the German word “Ehre”, which means honor. He also related Ari-to “Erben” (heirs) and “Wehren” (defenders). He made the point that they were similarly pronounced and that the German words drew directly from the “Arian language” and that Germans must have been descendants of the Aryans. At this time, the view of the term ‘Aryan’ was purely linguistic. Philologists talked about Aryan as group of people that spoke a certain language and the path and influence that language had over time. The Aryan people were none other than the speakers of the Aryan language.

How did Aryan begin to be viewed as a race?

In 1855, Joseph Arthur comte de Gobineau, a French aristocrat, wrote a book entitled The inequality of the Human Races, which was one of the first examples of scientific racism. His book describes characteristics of each of the human races, which he categorizes as three: white, black and yellow. He holds Christian views to back up to some degree his argument and believes that “Adam is the ancestor of the white race” (de Gobineau 118). He states several characteristics of each of the races, and shows the white race to have the best qualities as well as “the monopoly on beauty, intelligence and strength” (de Gobineau 209). He says that all civilizations on earth today are derived from interracial mixing of white, black and yellow races. He goes on to say that the German people are the original pure Arians, or rather that the Aryans were ‘Les races germaniques’, and that most of the other civilizations all had Aryan blood in them, although they were polluted. The three races that he portrayed laid the basis for race analysis for the rest of the 19th century. This was one of the first publications that went in depth about certain characteristics of certain races, as well as a hypothesis of a 3 root race system. His initial purpose for his work was to show why there was a degeneration of societies and what was causing it. His hypothesis was that the race of the people determined how successful they were (de Gobineau 26). Because of the belief of the Aryan success and power as the root of European languages, they were viewed as an example of the pure white race.

These ideas were supported alongside the contemporary ideology of unilineal cultural evolutionism that was perpetuated in the 19th century by sociologists such as Herbert Spencer, Auguste Comte, and Lewis Morgan. Unilineal cultural evolutionism was an ideology which was believed to be a universal succession of evolutionary stages that take
place in societies, starting with savagery, progressing to barbarism and eventually reaching
the pinnacle which was contemporary Western civilization. De Gobineau’s work portrayed
a link to the less civilized people in relation to their race, implying that there was
something about their race that made them less civilized and unable to become as such.
This added a dehumanizing and separating effect between white Europeans and those of a
different race that were not, according to their ideologies, civilized.

Where did the Aryans come from?
Philology has always believed that there must be a common root, a protolanguage, to
modern European languages. Much of the philology of the 19th century was still guided by
Christian ideologies and beliefs, especially that of the Tower of Babel. They wanted to find
the root of the language and assumed a certain type of people spoke the language. They
believed that the closer they got to the original language, the closer they got to the original
people. They saw that the Arian influences in many languages were great so they sought
after the Proto-Aryan language, and by doing so, searched for the Proto-Aryan people that
spoke that language. This was the beginning of the blend of language and biology.

Max Muller, a German-born philologist, was the first to mention and talk about the “Aryan
race” in English in his 1861 Lectures on the Science of Language. He hypothesizes that the
roots of the Aryans were agricultural nomads and the term AR- goes back to the original
proto language and means “to till” or “open the soil” and he gives examples of similarities in
several languages (239). However this nomadic people grew larger and and in his book,
Biographies of words, and the home of the Aryas (1888), he proposed that an Aryan invasion
of India, in which the “dark aboriginal inhabitants” were invaded by “their more fair-
skinned conquerors” took place (245). The Indian invasion theory led to a shift in people
wondering where the Aryans hailed from. This theory is one which many later philologists
will clutch on to and make it a main point of their research. In his book he talks at length
about the concept of the Aryan ‘race’. He popularized the term, even though in his work he
says that “Aryas are those who speak Aryan languages, whatever their colour, whatever
their blood” (245). Muller’s idea of ‘race’ was that race was the language, culture and
religion not the physical appearance.

“[I]n early history of the human intellect, there exists the most intimate relationship
between language, religion and nationality- a relationship quite independent of
those physical elements, the blood, the skill or the hair, on which ethnologists have
attempted to found their classification of the human race”

He viewed the Indians as being ‘Aryan brethren’ and that Europeans and Indians belonged
to the same race. Muller’s ideas of race, however, were not regarded. Philologists would
eventually use the term ‘race’ in context to have a meaning more biological than
sociocultural, something that Muller was in part responsible for, but had not intended.

Robert G. Latham, an anthropologist, in the 1850s attacked Max Muller about his idea of the
Aryans and their roots in India. Latham believed that race was innately biological and that
the Aryans could not have been the Indians. He argues that the Indians had never
conquered anything, but rather that European accomplishments far outshone the accomplishments of the Indians. Therefore the Europeans were part of the white race, and the Indians were part of the yellow race (Arvidsson 47). Latham strongly opposed Muller’s ideas and instead proposed a radically repositioned theoretical homeland of the Aryans. Rather than being in or near India, he positioned it near Scandinavia, presenting an argument that the Lithuanian language has many of the archaic features that Sanskrit does. He also felt it was easier to explain that the Aryans emigrated from Europe than to believe that all the different groups and cultures in Europe found their way out of Asia. In *Elements of Comparative Philology* (1862) he says

“Has the Sanskrit reached India from Europe or have the Lithuanic, the Slavonic, the Latin, the Greek, and the German, reached Europe from India? If historical evidence be wanting, the *a priori* presumptions must be considered. I submit that history is silent, and that the presumptions are in favor of the smaller class having been deduced from the area of the larger rather than *vice versa*. If so, the *situs* of the Sanskrit is on the eastern, or south-eastern, frontier of the Lithuanic; and its origin is European” (611).

Muller hypothesized that the Aryan invaders hailed from somewhere near Lithuania, and said that Lithuanian had as many archaic features as did Sanskrit (Arvidsson 142). This theory was well received and propagated among Europe. Their sense of identity was changing. The locality of the Aryan homeland was brought to the Europeans, and the idea became very popular.

The shift that took place about the understanding of the Aryan birthplace developed within the mindset of the romantic nationalism that was taking place, especially in Germany after the Franco-Prussian War and the reunification of Germany. The idea of an European homeland went along with folklore’s focus on Germanic material (Arvidsson 142). It was not until Karl Penka, an Austrian philologist and anthropologist, made the proposal in his work, *Die Herkunft der Arier* (1886), that “the pure Aryans... are represented only by the North Germans and Scandinavians, a most prolific race, of great stature, muscular strength, energy and courage, whose splendid natural endowments enable it to conquer the feebler races to the East, the South and the West and to impose its language on the subject peoples” (46). The homeland of the Aryans, according to him was, as Latham thought, in Scandinavia. Theodore Pösche, in *Die Arier* (1878), laid the basis describing the appearance of the Aryans as being blond haired, blue eyed and fair skinned, and that the home of the Aryans must be where these traits would be most dominant (Arvidsson 142). The Aryans, the pure white race, still existed. There was a huge sense of national pride, especially in Germany, where scientists stressed the similarities of the Scandanavian and Germanic peoples. The ‘Nordic race’ became synonymous with the ‘Aryan race’ (Arvidsson 143). This pride of being the master race, the most perfect people, was in part main reason in why Adolf Hitler and the Nazi party were able to rise to power.
Aryan. What happened to this word? Why did this happen?

Aryan went from being a linguistic term defining a culture of people in India that spoke a hypothetical proto-language, the Aryan language, to being a term for a perfect biological master race that originated in Europe. Much of the history of this word is based off of misunderstandings and using contemporary science to fulfill one's own agenda. Many of the original assumptions based off of the language, such as the connection Schlegel made between Sanskrit and German, were not viewed as nationalistic at first, just proof towards German having a direct descent from the original proto-language. Aryans were closer to the roots of the languages, but it was only cultural. There was no one people to whom this language belonged, only a shared area and linguistic roots. The concept of the Aryans as those that speak the Aryan language began to change when the Indian invasion theory was developed by Muller. The invaders invaded India and brought the Aryan language. Questions such as “Who were these invaders?” and “Where did these invaders come from?” started to be asked.

An Aryan homeland was envisioned. The Aryan language became fused to the Aryan people, and the view that the Aryan people came from someplace and were one nationality took over the idea that the Aryans were anyone that spoke the Aryan language. The Aryans were viewed as mighty conquer, and philologists began to wonder where these people originated from. With racist ideologies beginning to develop and a strong sense of European nationalism growing, the Europeans theorized that they were the original Aryans, because only the white race could have been capable of doing that which the Aryans had done. The Europeans had created this view of the Aryan race. There is no proof that there even was a Proto-Indo-European language, but it was taken as fact. So as theories piled upon theories, the term Aryan got further and further away from the original theory. ‘Aryan’ started as a culture of shared linguistic history, changing to the language of a group of people who invaded India, and then to the language of a nationality. European ethnocentrism pervaded the philologists’ minds and research and through them the Europeans created their own mythical Aryan race.

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